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ABSTRACT

Like most institutions in a world of change, the practice of mentoring is being influenced by new forms of work, technology, and learning. Organizational trends such as downsizing, restructuring, teamwork, increased diversity, and individual responsibility for career development are contributing to a resurgent interest in mentoring in the 1990s. Many organizations are instituting formal mentoring programs as a cost-effective way to upgrade skills, enhance recruitment and retention, and increase job satisfaction. Telementoring through the Internet is emerging as a way to pair teachers and learners with subject-matter experts who can provide advice, guidance, and feedback on learning projects. Mentoring supports much of what is currently known about how individuals learn, including the socially constructed nature of learning and the importance of experiential, situated learning experiences. The most effective mentoring is that involving guided experiential learning. Because learning takes place within the social context, the interpersonal relationship of mentor and mentee is considered essential. If developing learning organizations in a learning society is a desirable social goal, mentoring can perform an important function in helping people develop their highest potential. (Contains 17 references) (MN)

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ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education

by Sandra Kerka

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New Perspectives on Mentoring

Like most institutions in a world of change, the age-old practice of mentoring is being influenced by new forms of work, technology, and learning. Mentoring is typically defined as a relationship between an experienced and a less experienced person in which the mentor provides guidance, advice, support, and feedback to the protégé (Haney 1997). Mentoring is a way to help new employees learn about organizational culture (Bierema 1996), to facilitate personal and career growth and development, and to expand opportunities for those traditionally hampered by organizational barriers, such as women and minorities (Gunn 1995). The benefits of mentoring are not only work related; it can provide individuals with opportunities to enhance cultural awareness, aesthetic appreciation, and the potential to lead meaningful lives (Galbraith and Cohen 1995).

A traditional mentoring model is the apprentice learning from a master. In the Industrial Age, mentoring focused on career advancement within organizational hierarchies (Haney 1997). Now the Information Age demands a wide range of cognitive, interpersonal, and technical skills, and mentoring is changing to cope with these expanded needs. This *Digest* looks at new forms of and perspectives on mentoring and the kinds of learning that result from mentoring relationships.

Mentoring and Organizational Change

Organizational trends such as downsizing, restructuring, teamwork, increased diversity, and individual responsibility for career development are contributing to the resurgent interest in mentoring in the 1990s. "Downsizing has heightened the need to preserve institutional memory and to share the information and experience that remain in the company" (Jossi 1997, p. 52). Mentors represent continuity; as mentors, older, experienced workers can continue contributing to their organizations and professions. The Mentoring Institute (1997) maintains that, in the past, mentoring typically just "happened" as experienced people recognized and developed new talent or as beginners sought the counsel of knowledgeable elders. Now, the institute describes a "new mentoring paradigm": today's protégés are better educated but still need a mentor's practical know-how and wisdom ("craft knowledge") that can be acquired only experientially. Therefore, many organizations are instituting formal mentoring programs as a cost-effective way to upgrade skills, enhance recruitment and retention, and increase job satisfaction (Jossi 1997).

Many mentoring programs have been geared specifically to women and minorities as a way of helping them break into the "Old Boy Network" and through the "Glass Ceiling." However, the value of opening these opportunities to all is being recognized. Gunn (1995) suggests that a more democratic approach to mentoring is emerging, open to more employees at more levels. For example, a high-level new employee hired because of specific expertise may still need the coaching in organizational culture that mentors can provide, a form of partnership that is a "two-way transfer of skills and experience" (p. 65). This more inclusive mentoring strategy is seen as an alternative to the career ladders and security that organizations are no longer providing (ibid.). Another democratic approach is a trend toward group mentoring in which the mentor is a learning leader of a team or "learning group" within a learning organization (Kaye and Jacobson 1996). Members of a diverse learning group can learn from each other (peer mentoring) as well as from the learning leader.

Loeb (1995) goes further by suggesting that one-on-one mentoring is becoming less viable as competition increases and people change jobs frequently, becoming less identified with one organization. He recommends that individuals manage their own career development with the help of a "board of advisors"—multiple mentors within and outside of their organizations who can provide a wide range of expertise and advice about both specific organizational politics and culture as well as broader trends in a profession or field.

Mentoring and Technological Change

Although the Internet offers a vast and often bewildering array of information resources, there is still no substitute for human relationships. Telementoring is emerging as a way to pair teachers and learners with subject-matter experts who can provide advice, guidance, and feedback on learning projects. Among the intermediaries involved in matching online mentors with protégés are Mentor Center <http://mentorcenter.bbn.com/>, The Electronic Emissary <http://www.tapr.org/emissary/>, and LearnWell eMentors <http://www.learnwell.org/>. Technology is also assisting mentoring in organizations, as corporations with offices around the nation and the world connect mentors and protégés via electronic mail or videoconferencing (Jossi 1997). Telementoring is also proving essential in distance learning. The isolation that often contributes to distance learners dropping out can be overcome by pairing learners with faculty telementors. Empire State College (Alliance 1995) has successfully used this strategy to improve retention and completion for distance learners and adult students in individualized degree programs. At Iona College (Oswald 1996), faculty mentors use telephone, written, and e-mail interaction to guide video-based learning for adult students.

The combination of digital technologies and organizational changes is making individuals more responsible for their own learning and career development. Freelancing, consulting, and "portfolio work" make it more difficult for people to connect with traditional sources of mentors in organizations (Dyson 1997). At the same time, teleworking increases physical distance from the workplace and decreases the ability to acquire the tacit or craft knowledge that comes from interaction with experienced workers. For these reasons, mentoring becomes even more important for individuals attempting to develop an array of flexible skills and for organizations seeking to maintain institutional knowledge (Raghuram 1996).

Learning through Mentoring

Mentoring supports much of what is currently known about how individuals learn, including the socially constructed nature of learning and the importance of experiential, situated learning experiences (Kerka 1997). According to constructivist theory, learning is most effective when situated in a context in which new knowledge and skills will be used and individuals construct meaning for themselves but within the context of interaction with others. Experts facilitate learning by modeling problem-solving strategies, guiding learners in approximating the strategies while learners articulate their thought processes. Experts coach learners with appropriate scaffolds or aids, gradually decreasing assistance as learners internalize the process and construct their own knowledge and understanding (ibid.). These processes are reflected in the mentor's roles of guide, adviser, coach, motivator, facilitator, and role model within a contextual setting (Galbraith and Cohen 1995; Haney 1997; Kaye and Jacobson 1996). Functioning as experts, mentors provide au-

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thentic, experiential learning opportunities as well as an intense interpersonal relationship through which social learning takes place.

Guided Experiential Learning

Bell (1997) likens the mentor's role in experiential learning to that of birds guiding their young in leaving the nest; they support without rescuing, provide scaffolding (e.g., in a problem situation, asking "What do think you should do next?"), and have the courage to let learners fail. Learning from experience, "mentees speed past learning basic routines and get on to the job...they enjoy a fast linkup between what was learned in the classroom and what is needed in the workplace" (Galbraith and Cohen 1995, p. 60). Exploring how experience is transformed into expertise, Cleminson and Bradford (1996) identify three types of learning: trial and error, "sitting by Nellie" (observing an experienced person), and guided learning. The latter, they suggest, is characteristic of the most effective mentoring. With trust as the foundation of the relationship, mentors give protégés a safe place to try out ideas, skills, and roles with minimal risk (Kaye and Jacobson 1996). Such experiments are more authentic when linked with real-world activities such as temporary work assignments or short-term projects. The knowledge acquired is thus constantly reinterpreted and developed through practice (Cleminson and Bradford 1996).

Learning through Relationships

Although learning is a matter of individual interpretation of experiences, it takes place within the social context (Kerka 1997). Therefore, the interpersonal relationship of mentor and mentee is recognized as essential (Galbraith and Cohen 1995). "The idea of learning as a transaction—an interactive and evolving process between mentors and their adult learners—is considered a fundamental component of the adult mentoring relationship" (ibid., p. 17). Mentoring provides two primary functions: career/instrumental and psychosocial. The instrumental function is the external value of the relationship; mentees benefit from their mentors' knowledge, contacts, support, and guidance. The psychosocial function is the internal value of the ongoing interpersonal dialogue, collaborative critical thinking, planning, reflection, and feedback (Galbraith and Cohen 1995).

The psychosocial function of mentoring is a form of relational learning, the value of which is increasingly being recognized in a less hierarchical, team environment. Women especially have been found to favor relational learning. For the executive women in Bierema's (1996) study, "relationships informed them about their company's culture and helped them process both cognitive and experiential learning experiences" (p. 157). Mentoring is a personalized and systematic way to be socialized into an organization's culture; such cultural competence is important in both work and academic settings. For example, first-generation college students often experience culture clash in academic environments that can be overcome with a mentor's guidance (Galbraith and Cohen 1995). However, socialization can also be constraining if the novice is exposed to a "limited repertoire of practices, views, and expectations" (Cleminson and Bradford 1996, p. 255).

As organizational diversity increases, the question arises whether mentoring becomes a vehicle for assimilation and exclusion. The personal relationship at the heart of mentoring can be problematic when mentor and mentee are of different genders, races, or ethnic backgrounds. There is disagreement over the advantages and disadvantages of matching characteristics in mentoring relationships. Ensher and Murphy (1997) found that perceived and actual similarity affected the amount of instrumental and psychosocial support mentors provided as well as protégé satisfaction. Other research, however, showed mixed results for "diversified" mentoring (Russell and Tinsley 1997). Some argue that race and gender should not play a role in mentor selection (Jossi 1997), but mentors still need to be sensitive to different cultural perspectives or mentoring will merely perpetuate homogenous, exclusionary values and culture (Galbraith and Cohen 1995).

If developing learning organizations in a learning society is a desirable social goal, mentoring can perform an important function in helping people develop their highest potential. If "everyone is capable of being a teacher (mentor) *and* a learner (mentee)" (ibid., p. 92), individuals should strive to develop their capacity to learn from and support the learning of others.

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